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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings of a study that investigated the extent to which homeless children in the United States receive the "free and appropriate education" to which they are entitled. Data were collected through several surveys conducted in two San Francisco Bay Area counties: (1) surveys of parents in homeless shelters with 313 school-age children and homeless parents with 607 school-age children who requested social services; (2) interviews with 92 homeless school-age children, 65 formerly homeless children, and 83 families at-risk of becoming homeless; and (3) a survey of 71 school district staff members in 29 public school districts. Findings show that an estimated 88 to 92 percent of homeless children were enrolled in school and that the children were not denied access to education because of restrictive enrollment requirements. The more serious obstacles were the high number of school transfers and transportation. Although parents expressed concern about their children's academic performance, school appeared to play an important stabilizing role in the children's lives. It is recommended that educators minimize the disruptions that result from frequent school transfers and poor attendance and collaborate with service agencies to meet students' basic needs. Finally, social policies that help families find permanent housing are needed to improve homeless children's chances for educational success. Five tables are included. (LMI)

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THE DISADVANTAGE OF HOMELESSNESS IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING

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THE DISADVANTAGE OF HOMELESSNESS IN CHILDREN'S SCHOOLING

Homelessness has been a problem in this country for a long time; however, homelessness among families has increased dramatically in recent years. Recent figures reveal that families with children make up more than one-third of all individuals who are homeless (Children's Defense Fund, 1988). The effects of homelessness can be harmful to the physical and emotional well-being of adults, but this temporary state of existence can be especially devastating to children. With no place to call their own, family stress and turmoil, abject poverty, and little stability in their lives, these children have little chance to develop into healthy, happy, and productive young adults.

For many homeless families, the education system provides the only hope for liberating children from the confines of poverty; however, the adverse conditions associated with homelessness present formidable challenges to the academic success of these children. Although homeless children face many of the same challenges as housed poor children, problems such as unstable living conditions, unemployment, family problems, and health problems, make homeless children particularly at-risk of school failure. When their families are focused on the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, it is difficult for these children to be successful in school.

Educating the growing number of homeless children has become a national concern, as policymakers, educators, and others work toward determining how the education system should and can respond to the needs of homeless children. Numerous reports in recent years have cited the many obstacles homeless children face in their educational achievement, from difficulties in enrollment and getting to school to obstacles to learning and academic success.

In 1987 the federal McKinney Act was enacted to address some of these problems. Among other requirements, this law requires that public education institutions provide homeless children with a "free and appropriate education" and that education institutions examine policies that may prevent homeless children from accessing a public education. McKinney Act amendments in 1990 further stipulate that schools provide homeless children with appropriate programs to allow these children to be successful in school.

This paper presents findings from a recent study which investigates whether or not homeless children are receiving the "free and appropriate education" to which they are entitled. Although the concern for educating homeless children has been great, we know very little about this group of children on a national level. This study is one of only a few

studies conducted in this country that has surveyed homeless parents and their children about their experiences with the school system. If we are to provide homeless children with the educational opportunities that they need to succeed in school and in life, we must learn how the current system is limiting their opportunities, as well as how it is helping them.

Using the reports of homeless parents, homeless children, as well as formerly homeless parents, this study helps answer questions about access to education and the degree to which the needs of homeless children are met by the current education system. In the sections below, findings are presented on homeless children's enrollment in school, their school attendance, their school stability in terms of school transfers, parents' reports of how well their children are doing in school, and children's attitudes about school and their educational attainment. The paper begins with a brief review of the existing literature on educating homeless children and youth.

Summary of the Literature

Concerns regarding access to education have dominated the literature on the education of homeless children. Estimates of the percentage of school-age homeless children not enrolled in school have ranged from 15 to over 50 percent. An often cited report of the U.S. Department of Education estimated in 1989 that almost a third of school-age homeless children were not enrolled in school (U.S. Department of Education, 1989) and another source reported that 57% of homeless children were not enrolled (National Coalition for the Homeless, 1987). On the other hand, several small-scale studies have found relatively high rates of school enrollment among homeless children. For example, Bassuk, Rubin, and Lawriat (1986) found that all 50 of the school-aged children in their study of families living in Boston shelters were attending school, according to their parents. Another researcher found that 91% of school-aged children in her study of New York City homeless families (n=427) were enrolled in school and that most of those who were not enrolled in school were awaiting placement (Rafferty, 1989). Thus, the literature provides conflicting evidence about whether or not homeless children are enrolled in school.

A number of reports have identified potential barriers to homeless children's access to education, including residency requirements, guardianship issues, requirements for previous school records, and other policies preventing homeless children from school enrollment (e.g., Stronge and Tenhouse, 1990; National Coalition for the Homeless,

1987). For example, a 1989 report found that schools in three-fifths of the states studied still did not admit homeless children without proof of local residency (National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, 1990). A 1989 survey of service providers for the homeless found that a third of the service providers knew of instances where children were denied access to school because of residency laws (Schumack, 1987). Reports such as these have caused great concern that despite the 1987 McKinney Act, homeless children are still being barred from educational institutions.

Concerns about access go beyond enrollment issues to concerns about school attendance among homeless children and youth. Reports on homeless children have found that issues such as transportation difficulties, health problems, fatigue, and parents' need for child care for younger siblings often make it difficult for homeless children to attend school. A study of New York families in shelters found that 42% of homeless children were absent more than 2 days in the month prior to data collection, with some children missing more than half of the month's school days (Rafferty, 1989), and a Los Angeles study discovered that homeless children missed more days of school (8-9 in a three-month period) than housed poor children (Wood, et al., 1989). Relaxing restrictive residency requirements and other enrollment requirements will not be particularly beneficial for children who cannot regularly get to school.

In the last several years, amendments to the McKinney Act (1990) and policy research have shifted attention to the issues of quality and appropriateness of the education for homeless students, recognizing that the problems of homeless students do not end when they walk through the school doors. Although there has not been an abundance of research conducted on the effects of homelessness on children's academic performance, there is evidence to suggest that homeless children are not performing well in school.

The disadvantage of homelessness in children's educational prospects may begin before children are of school age. Research indicates that poor diet and health care and other consequences of poverty can result in developmental problems among young children. Comparing homeless and comparable nonhomeless preschool children, Bassuk and Rubin found that 54% of homeless children exhibited at least one developmental lag (including gross or fine motor skills, social development, and language), while 16% of housed poor children had one or more developmental lag (Bassuk and Rubin, 1987), indicating that homeless children are already at a disadvantage compared to housed children at school entry.

Once homeless children enter school, evidence suggests that they have high rates of grade retention (e.g., Rafferty and Rollins, 1989; Wood, et al., 1989) and low achievement test scores (Strong, 1989; Rafferty and Rollins, 1989). One research team found that 43% of homeless children were performing below average in their work, compared to 23% of comparable housed children (Bassuk and Rosenberg, 1988). Another study compared homeless children in shelters and matched nonhomeless 6-12 year olds on several IQ and achievement tests and found that on several of the ability measures, children in the homeless sample scored significantly lower than the nonhomeless control group (Rescorla, Parker, and Stolley, 1991). These limited findings do not conclusively show that homeless children are not succeeding in school; however, what we do know about the lives of homeless children suggests that they face serious obstacles to staying in school and succeeding academically.

In the next section, we describe the methodologies used to collect information for this study of homeless parents and their children.

Methods

The findings presented in this paper come from several surveys conducted as part of a study of homelessness in two San Francisco Bay area counties encompassing urban and suburban areas. Much of the information reported in this paper concerns the educational experiences of 313 school-age children and youth included in a survey of homeless parents, most of whom lived in homeless shelters. In this survey, a random sample of homeless parents were asked about the school experiences of their children. Additional limited information on the school enrollment patterns of homeless children was obtained from a second group of homeless families--those requesting services from 40 social service agencies in the two counties during a several month period. Information about school enrollment and attendance for 607 school-age children was collected on intake forms by service providers and transmitted to the study team.

To supplement the information provided by homeless parents, interviews with 92 randomly selected homeless school-age children were conducted. The study also included surveys of two groups of families who were similar to the homeless families but who had housing at the time of data collection: families who were formerly homeless and poor families who were at-risk of becoming homeless. Although the samples for these two

surveys were not large (65 and 83 school-age children, respectively), they provide a basis for comparison on several measures of educational outcomes.

Each survey described above involved structured in-person interviews (conducted in English and in Spanish) by trained data collectors (except for information from service providers' intake forms). Interviews were conducted in the Spring of 1991.

There are a number of limitations to our study. First, the part of the study which focuses on currently homeless families includes primarily families residing in shelters, and all of the children interviewed resided in shelters. Thus, the homeless parent and children samples do not generally represent homeless families who had other types of temporary housing arrangements or no shelter at all. Second, information about children's school attendance and performance came from parental reports--we were not able to verify children's academic information with school records. Third, the findings about homeless children may overrepresent children from large families, because the analysis uses parents' reports about all of the parents' school-age children. For example, if a family had five children, and the parent had transportation problems which affected all of the children, then results reported by this family weighed more in the findings about children than results reported by a family with one or two children. Fourth, homeless children attending a shelter school are overrepresented in this sample. The parents of 219 children gave us the name of the school that their child(ren) attended, and 20% of these children attended a shelter school. Since we know of only one shelter school in the two counties, this population is clearly overrepresented. Where possible, the experiences of children attending the shelter school will be compared with those of children attending other schools. Despite these limitations, we believe that the results from the parent survey provide useful information about the school experiences of children who are homeless.

In addition to the reports of children and their parents, we report findings from a survey of 71 school district staff members in 29 public schools in the two counties. The districts and schools were purposively selected to obtain variation on several school characteristics (e.g., grades served, percentage of low-income students, geographic location). Typically, at least two interviews were conducted at each school: one with a school administrator (usually the principal) and one with a secretary or clerk who interacted with parents and children when they came to the school office. The sample of school staff also includes some teachers who had homeless children in their class, and other school staff who interacted with homeless families (e.g., social worker, community outreach specialist).

Results

The results of analyses conducted for this study are presented below.

School Enrollment and Attendance of Homeless Children

In our survey of homeless parents, we found that 88% of homeless children ages 6-17 were enrolled in school at the time of data collection, according to parental reports. Among the sample of homeless families providing information at intake into service providers, homeless parents reported that 92% of their children were enrolled in school. These figures compare to 96% enrollment in the sample of formerly homeless children and 94% enrollment in the sample of children who were at-risk of becoming homeless.

Table 1 shows school enrollment by several individual and family characteristics. As the table indicates, older children were more likely not to be enrolled in school than children in the younger age groups ($X^2=8.14$, $p<.05$). About 80% of children ages 13-17 were enrolled in school, while between 91% and 95% of children ages 6-12 were enrolled in school. Among the younger children, parental explanations for nonenrollment included the family moving around too much, problems with transportation, and lack of information about which school the child should attend. For nonenrolled youth in the older age group, parents typically reported that the youth did not want to go to school.

There were no differences in enrollment rates between male and female children; however, enrollment rates differed by ethnic group, with 98% of the African American children enrolled in school, compared to 84-85% of children who were Caucasian, Hispanic and other ethnicities. To explore this finding, we conducted further analyses of ethnic differences in school enrollment controlling for children's age, since African American children were overrepresented in the youngest age group. When we controlled for age group, we found that the African American children in the sample still had a higher rate of school enrollment than children from other ethnic backgrounds.

With regard to the family variables, the chi-square tests of independence revealed that whether or not children were enrolled in school was not associated with whether the child lived in a two-parent or single-parent family, and whether or not the parent(s) was employed, had ever had a substance abuse problem, had always lived in the United States, or had difficulties speaking, writing or reading English.

Table 1

SCHOOL ENROLLMENT RATES BY INDIVIDUAL AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Percentage of children enrolled in school	Number of Responses
Age*		
6-9	91.0	111
10-12	94.6	55
13-17	80.2	86
Gender		
Male	87.7	155
Female	87.4	103
Ethnicity*		
African American	98.3	58
Hispanic	84.4	141
Caucasian	84.4	32
Other	85.7	28
Parent employed	89.7	39
Parent not employed	87.8	213
Parent always lived in the U.S.	89.8	137
Parent did not always live in U.S.	86.1	115
Two-parent family	84.5	84
Single-parent family	90.7	162
Parental difficulties with English language	87.0	138
No parental difficulties with English language	89.5	114
Substance abuse problem in family	91.5	82
No substance abuse problem in family	86.5	170

* Using the chi-square test of independence, for the difference between the groups in the category (e.g., ethnicity, parental employment, whether or not the parent was employed, etc.) $p<.05$.

Table 2 compares children enrolled in school with children not enrolled in school on several additional family situational factors. The table shows that for children not enrolled in school, the mean number of times the family had moved in the previous 12 months was 4.4 compared to 3.0 for children who were enrolled in school ($p<.001$). The number of children in the family also appears to be related to whether or not children were enrolled in school, although this difference is not significant at the .05 probability level. The mean number of children in the family among children enrolled in school was close to 4 compared to about 3 for children not enrolled in school. There were no differences between children enrolled in school and those not enrolled in school in the level of their parents' education, parental emotional distress (a measure including parents' responses regarding whether or not they had various emotional or psychological problems such as depression, feelings of hopelessness, fears or anxieties), and for immigrant families, how long parents had lived in the United States. Therefore, the two factors that appeared to increase the likelihood of children not being enrolled in school were housing moves, which was statistically significant, and a nonsignificant tendency to have smaller numbers of children in the family.

Table 2

RELATIONSHIPS OF FAMILY FACTORS TO SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Family Factor	Mean for children enrolled in school	Mean for children not enrolled in school	Significance Level
Length of time immigrant parent has lived in the U.S. (in years)	7.6	7.7	NS
Number of times family had moved in last 12 months	3.0	4.4	.001
Parent education level (in years)	8.0	7.6	NS
Number of children in family	3.7	3.1	.10
Adult distress scale	1.2	1.6	NS

Parents did not report many problems with enrollment procedures. Two parents reported that they had problems with the enrollment process taking a long time, and the parents of a few children said that their children were not in school because they were waiting for required immunizations. The parents of four children reported that they had to use a false address in order to enroll their child; however, we do not know whether these parents assumed an address was needed or whether the school actually required an address. Only two parents reported that they were prevented from enrolling their children in school for reasons other than immunization requirements: a father claimed that his daughter was not allowed to enroll because there was only one week of school left, and a mother claimed that there was a conflict about which school the child should attend. In the latter case, the mother was told by the school that her daughter had attended before the family moved to the shelter that the child should be registered at the school nearest the shelter. When the mother went to the school near the shelter, she was told that her daughter could not enroll there. It was only after the mother spent three days working with district personnel that the school near the shelter allowed the child to enroll. Reflecting on her experience, the mother observed, "I think the school didn't expect me to follow through." Fortunately, other homeless parents did not report this kind of difficulty with school enrollment procedures.

The relatively high school enrollment rate found for this sample may not mean that these homeless children and youth were getting to school on a daily basis. In the adult survey, parents were asked how many days in the last month each child was absent from school. According to parents' reports, about 41% of the children in this sample missed no days of school in the month prior to the interview, while 29% missed 1-2 days, 14% missed 3-5 days, 10% missed 6-10 days, and 6% missed more than half the school days in the month (11-20 days). Thus, 70% of the homeless children missed two days or less of school in the month prior to data collection and 30% missed more than 2 days. By assigning midpoint values to each of the categories of the number of days absent, we obtained a mean of 2.6 days of school absences during the preceding month among homeless children in our sample.

Table 3 compares school attendance information reported by the parents of children who were at-risk of becoming homeless and who were formerly homeless. For the sample of families at-risk of becoming homeless, parents reported that 49% of the children missed no days of school in the last month, 36% missed 1-2 days, and 15% missed more than 2 days, with a mean of 1.6 days for the month. For the formerly homeless sample, 29% of the children did not miss any days at school, 43% missed 1-2 days, and 27% missed more

Table 3

SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM RATES FOR GROUPS OF HOMELESS AND NONHOMELESS CHILDREN

	Percentage of children with number of days absent			
Survey[+]	0 days	1-2 days	More than 2 days	Number of Responses
Homeless parents	41	29	30	230
At-risk homelessness	49	36	15	70
Formerly homeless	29	43	27	51
Type of School[*]				
Shelter school	55	30	15	40
Nonshelter school	38	29	33	190

[+] For difference between the survey groups, $X^2 = 7.4$, $p<.12$.
[*] For difference between the types of school, $X^2 = 5.7$, $p<.06$.

than 2 days, with a mean of 2.4 days for the month, according to their parents. The chi-square test of independence shows that the number of days that homeless children were absent was not statistically different (based on a significance level of .05) than the number of days children who were formerly homeless or at-risk of becoming homeless were absent from school; however, the difference approaches significance ($X^2=7.4$, $p<.12$), suggesting that poor housed children may have slightly lower rates of absenteeism than homeless or formerly homeless children.

Table 3 also compares the absenteeism rates of homeless students enrolled in the shelter school compared to homeless children in nonshelter schools. Not surprisingly, since the shelter school was located at their residence, shelter school students had fewer days of school missed in the prior month than students enrolled in regular schools, a relationship that approached significance ($X^2=5.7$, $p<.06$). When students in shelter schools are excluded from the school absenteeism calculations, the estimates of the percentage of homeless children who missed some school did not significantly change (e.g., 67% of homeless children enrolled in a regular school missed two or fewer days of school in the preceding month versus 70% of all homeless children enrolled in school).

As with school enrollment, we wanted to see if the number of days children were absent from school was associated with characteristics of the children and families. Table 4 summarizes attendance data for children with various individual and family characteristics. The first comparison in the table involves age groups. Although the chi-square test of independence shows that children's age was not significantly associated with their school attendance, there were some differences in school attendance between the age groups which were in the expected direction. While children in the two youngest categories (6-9 and 10-12) had similar attendance patterns, youth in the age 13-17 category were more likely to miss more than 2 days of school in the prior month than children in the younger age groups (37% compared to 28% and 24%, respectively, for children in the age 6-9 and 10-12 categories). Additionally, only 33% of the youth ages 13-17 missed no days of school compared to 44% and 46% of the children in the 6-9 and 10-12 age categories. Thus, older homeless youth not only were more likely not to be enrolled in school at all, it appears that they attended school less often than younger children.

There was no significant association between females and males in their school attendance; however, there was a significant difference in attendance between children of different ethnic backgrounds ($X^2=12.6$, $p<.05$). African American children were much less likely to have missed more than 2 days of school in the preceding month than other children (13% versus between 33% and 40% for children of other ethnic backgrounds). This finding that African American homeless children had better school attendance rates is consistent with our finding that these children had higher school enrollment rates.

We thought that family situational factors such as whether children lived with two parents or one, and whether or not the parent(s) was employed, had difficulties with English, had ever had a substance abuse problem, and had always lived in the United States would be related to the number of school absences. The only family characteristic in Table 4 that revealed a significant association with school attendance was whether or not the parent was employed at the time of data collection ($X^2=21.1$, $p<.01$). Only 6% of children whose parent(s) was employed missed more than 2 days of school in the last month, compared to 34% of children whose parent was not employed. This analysis suggests that parental employment may provide some stability to the school lives of homeless children; interestingly, parental employment was not related to whether or not children were enrolled in school, as reported earlier.

Table 4

SCHOOL ATTENDANCE DATA BY CHILD AND FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS

Characteristic	Percentage of children with Number of Days Absent in Last Month: 0 Days	1-2 Days	More than 2 Days	Number of Responses
Age				
6-9	44.3	28.3	27.4	106
10-12	46.3	29.6	24.1	54
13-17	32.9	30.0	37.1	70
Gender				
Male	43.8	29.9	26.4	144
Female	39.6	27.5	33.0	91
Ethnicity*				
African American	46.4	41.1	12.5	56
Hispanic	41.1	25.8	33.1	124
Caucasian	35.5	29.0	35.5	31
Other	44.0	16.0	40.0	25
Parent was employed **	36.1	58.3	5.6	36
Parent was not employed	42.3	23.7	34.0	194
Parent had always lived in U.S.	39.5	31.0	29.5	129
Parent had not always lived in U.S.	43.6	26.7	29.7	101
Parent had difficulties with English language	38.5	27.9	33.6	122
Parent did not have difficulties with English language	44.4	30.6	25.0	108
Parent had substance abuse problem	44.6	31.1	24.3	74
Parent did not have substance abuse problem	39.7	28.2	32.1	156
Two-parent family	47.2	27.8	25.0	72
Single-parent family	37.3	30.7	32.0	153

* Using the chi-square test of independence, for the difference between the groups in the category (e.g., ethnicity, parental employment, whether or not the parent was employed, etc.) $p<.05$.

** $p<.01$

To further examine school attendance patterns, we correlated the categories of days absent (5 categories) and various continuous variables representing additional family factors. The Spearman correlation coefficients are presented in Table 5. As the table illustrates, the parent's education level and the number of times the family moved in the preceding 12 months were not significantly related to the number of days children were absent from school in the preceding month; however, other family factors were related to absenteeism. The length of time the family had been homeless and the level of adult distress were both positively related to the number of days the child was absent ($r=.15$, $p=.05$; $r=.22$, $p<.01$; respectively). Furthermore, as with school enrollment, the number of children in the family was negatively related to school attendance ($r=-.17$, $p<.01$), suggesting that the presence of more children in the family makes it easier for children to enroll in and attend school. A final family variable, the amount of time immigrant parents had lived in the United States, was significantly related to school attendance, but the relationship was negative which was opposite to what we expected. The results show that the longer immigrant parents had been in the United States, the more days their children were absent from school. In summary, the length of time the family had been homeless, the level of self-reported adult distress, the number of children in the family, and the amount of time immigrant parents had been in the United States were the family variables that made a difference in homeless children's school attendance.

Interestingly, most of the homeless parents believed that their children's school attendance had not changed much since the family had become homeless. In fact, the parents of 87% of the children felt that their child's school attendance was about the same as or better than before they were homeless. Since we did not collect school attendance records, we cannot determine if school records are consistent with these parental reports.

We also examined the relationship between school attendance and the number of schools the child had attended since kindergarten and children's school grades as reported by their parents. School attendance was not related to the average grades the children received, but it was related to the number of schools they had attended ($r=.15$, $p<.05$). This relationship is most likely confounded with the age of child, since older children have attended a greater number of schools than younger children. Controlling for age group, we found that the number of absences was not related to the number of schools attended for children in the 6-9 and 10-12 age categories; however, absences were significantly related to the number of school transfers in the 13-17 age group ($r=.36$, $p<.01$). These data

Table 5

CORRELATION BETWEEN THE NUMBER OF DAYS OF SCHOOL HOMELESS CHILDREN MISSED IN THE LAST MONTH AND FAMILY SITUATIONAL FACTORS

	Number of Days Child Was Absent From School	
Family Situational Factor	**Correlation Coefficient**	**Significance Level**
Length of time homeless this episode	.15	.05
Parental education level	-.07	NS
Parental distress score	.22	.01
Number of children in family	-.17	.01
For immigrant parents, length of time in U.S.	.33	.01
Number of times family moved in past 12 months	.04	NS

therefore suggest that the number of disruptions experienced as a result of school transfers may have a negative effect on homeless adolescents' school attendance.

For homeless children and youth who had missed some school in the preceding month, transportation problems presented major obstacles. The parents of 42% of the children in our sample reported that it was more difficult to get their children to school since becoming homeless, and when asked why their child missed school in the prior month, the parents of 29% of the children cited transportation difficulties. Often there were no school buses available to transport homeless students to their schools. It was not uncommon for young homeless children to travel unaccompanied on public buses or use multiple buses.

Sickness was another major cause of school absences among homeless children. The parents of 36% of homeless children who missed school in the preceding month responded that their children were absent due to illness. Furthermore, children who had untreated medical problems were significantly more likely than children who did not to have high absenteeism rates (X^2=11.7, p<.01).

School Transfers

Other research has found that homelessness affects not only school attendance and enrollment, but the number of school transfers a child experiences. We found that the homeless children in our sample had attended an average of .91 schools for every year they had been in school, meaning that their school transfers averaged almost once a year since

kindergarten. Children who were at risk of becoming homeless and children who were formerly homeless attended an average of .61 and .75 schools, respectively, per year since kindergarten. Using analysis of variance techniques, we found that the average difference between these means was not statistically significant ($p<.17$); however, the differences were in the direction that we would expect, with homeless children experiencing more school transfers than other at-risk children. The number of school transfers since kindergarten was not significantly correlated to the length of time the family had been homeless or the number of times the family had moved in the prior 12 months. We did not obtain a measure of the number of recent school transfers, so we were not able to examine how factors such as the number of recent moves and the length of homelessness were related to recent school enrollment and school transfers. The results do show that the homeless children included in our sample had high rates of school transfers during their school careers.

Experiences of Homeless Children In School

This study obtained information from parents about their children's experiences in school. Generally, homeless parents felt that their children were not performing well in school, reporting that their children were receiving grades between B's and C's, on average. Although the reported grades do not give us a complete picture of children's educational performance, parental accounts suggest that many of the children were struggling in school. One mother described her son's struggle like this: "He feels humiliated being homeless. He feels humiliated at school, so he is not able to work and achieve his full capabilities." Other parents expressed similar concerns.

Whether children were enrolled in the shelter school or in a regular school, the parents were concerned about their children's performance in school. Parents reported that 25% of the children had special educational needs or problems such as difficulties with reading. The parents of about 38% of the children with special needs felt that these needs were not being met by the school, whether it was a shelter school or a regular school.

One difficulty for homeless children is finding the space, resources, and support they need to do their homework. Although most of the children in our study reported that they were able to find a quiet place to study at their shelter, the living quarters limitations made doing so a challenge. Half of the children said they did their homework in the

bedroom at the shelter, almost a fourth of them said they tried to find a place outdoors, and two children said they used a closet or the bathroom to find a quiet place to study.

Many educators have been concerned about homeless children being teased or finding it difficult to make friends at school. According to the parents and children in our study, teasing at school was generally not a problem. In addition, nearly three-fourths of the children included in the children's survey found it easy to make friends at school.

Parents and children indicated that other students at school often were not aware that the children were homeless. Less than half of the children in the children's survey who were enrolled in nonshelter schools reported that other students knew they were homeless. Younger children were more likely to report that other children knew they were homeless than older children (41% of children in 6-9 age group and 28% of youth in 13-17 age group indicated other students knew of homelessness).

We obtained measures of children's attitudes toward school by asking children and youth ages 10-17 to respond to such statements as "I'm satisfied at school because I'm learning a lot," "My teachers care about how I'm doing," "Most of the teachers don't really expect very good work from me," and "The best way to get through school is to goof off with friends." Children were asked to state whether they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with each statement. Using ten such statements from the children's questionnaire, we created an overall attitude scale, ranging from 1, indicating very positive attitudes toward school, to 4, indicating very negative attitudes toward school.

The mean attitude score was 2.0, indicating that the children and youth included in this measure had generally positive attitudes toward school. For many of them, school was the only stable part of their life. After describing the one and a half hour commute that her two children made to get to school, one homeless mother put it this way: "They don't want to leave school. It's the only stable thing they have."

Children's overall attitude scores were related to several factors. First, the more they exhibited signs of emotional distress (measured by children's self reports of the degree to which they were worried, sad, tense, lonely, or bored), the more negatively homeless children felt about school ($r=-.37$, $p<.01$). The degree to which they had physical health problems (a composite variable including children's self reports of how often they had

headaches, stomachaches, colds or other illnesses, injuries, skin problems, or eating problems) was also negatively related to their school attitudes ($r=-.30$, $p<.05$). We thought that the amount of time children had been at their current school might be related to their attitudes toward school. This correlation approaches significance ($r=.25$, $p<.10$), suggesting that the longer the children had been at their current school, the more positive they felt about school. Other factors such as the children's age, gender, the number of days they were absent from school in the preceding month, whether they were enrolled in a shelter school or a regular school, and whether or not they found it easy to make friends at school were not related to homeless children's attitudes toward school. Therefore, the factors that appeared to be related to children's overall school attitude score include their level of emotional distress, the degree to which they had health problems, and the length of time they had been at their current school.

From the children's questionnaire, we learned that homeless children and youth (ages 10-17) had high aspirations and expectations for their educational attainment: all children and youth except one indicated they expected to complete high school; 78% said they would like to go to a community or 4-year college, and 64% said they expected to go to college. Hence, being homeless did not seem to dampen these children's hopes for their educational futures.

Schools' Perspectives in Educating Homeless Children

Many of the reports on the education of homeless children have criticized the schools in the way they deal with enrolling and serving homeless children. To better understand the issues, we thought it would be important to get the perspective of school staff in how homeless children are enrolled and served in school.

To understand the enrollment process and how it affects homeless children, we asked school staff to describe how they dealt with various enrollment issues. We were particularly interested in how flexible schools were in dealing with families who did not satisfy usual enrollment requirements. For each issue, respondents were assigned a score measuring whether or not their response indicated flexibility on the school's part in enrolling homeless children. Individual responses were aggregated by school to get a school measure of flexibility on the issue. The enrollment issues addressed by the survey include:

- a homeless child has no record of immunization;
- a homeless child has no permanent residence or address;
- problems in getting a homeless child's records and transcripts of previous school work;
- problems in determining the appropriate grade level and program placement for homeless students;
- a homeless child is not living with a parent or legal guardian;
- the parents of a homeless child are undocumented immigrants;
- a homeless family has no documentation for enrollment in the free or reduced lunch program.

Overall, according to school staff, schools were quite flexible in their requirements and procedures when it came to enrolling homeless children. Only on the issue of immunization records did school personnel demonstrate inflexibility in their rules and procedures; for the other issues, the flexibility scores showed that for the most part, schools were not preventing children from enrolling because they failed to meet various enrollment requirements.

When discussing immunization issues, school staff indicated that inadequate immunization records was the enrollment problem that occurred most frequently among homeless children, and it was the issue about which school staff were the least flexible in their requirements. Children could not be enrolled without proof of immunization, according to most school staff in our sample. Only one respondent stated that the school could accept parents' verbal claim that the child's immunizations were up to date. Most school staff interviewed reported that parents were told where they could take their child to get the required immunizations. In a few cases, respondents stated that school staff members had escorted families to a local clinic.

Regarding residency requirements, school staff indicated that policies were relatively flexible, but schools were less flexible on this issue than on any other enrollment issue except for immunization requirements. Respondents in about a quarter of the schools stated that families had to show proof that they lived within the school's (or the district's) attendance area, and respondents in the same number of schools specifically stated that families were not required to show proof of residency when they enrolled their child in school. Respondents in about two-thirds of the schools reported that parents had to provide some sort of address to enroll the child in the school; however, a shelter address, the address of a friend or relative, or some information regarding how to contact the family in an emergency was often sufficient. These percentages do not sum to 100%, because respondents from the same school often gave different responses to this question. For

example, in all of the schools in which a respondent claimed that families had to show proof of residency to enroll, this response was never corroborated by a second staff member in the school (and in all of these schools, more than one staff member was interviewed). These discrepancies indicate that schools in our sample did not have clear policies pertaining to residency requirements for homeless students.

For the remaining enrollment issues, school staff indicated that they were quite flexible with their procedures and requirements. Schools were most flexible when it came to difficulties in obtaining transcripts for children's previous school work. Some respondents noted that this was a problem for many children in their school, particularly children from low-income families who often moved from school to school. According to the respondents, school staff did not turn children away because they did not have records of previous work. School personnel reported that they did their best to obtain records from previous schools, and they started the records over if the previous records could not be obtained.

One problem with the lack of previous records is that school staff are often unaware of homeless children's educational needs. When asked how students were placed in the appropriate grade level, about half of the respondents (representing 19 of 29 schools) said that they placed children according to their age, and about a quarter said they tried to find out the child's previous grade-level placement. Respondents in only ten schools reported that they routinely tested children to determine their placement. Generally, children were not tested for placement in special education until after they were placed in the regular education setting and someone referred them for testing. Several educators commented that by the time a child had been identified as needing special educational services, the child had moved to another school. Thus, although obtaining previous records did not appear to prevent homeless children from enrolling in school, this problem most likely affected the quality of their education.

After the issue of obtaining records from previous schools, the next highest flexibility scores were for the issues of the parents being undocumented immigrants and requirements for enrollment in the free lunch program. Most respondents stated that the parents' immigration status was not the school's concern and that they did not ask for this kind of information. As for enrolling families in the free or reduced lunch program, almost three-quarters of the respondents (in 25 of the 29 schools) stated that parents simply filled

out a form to qualify for the free lunch program and that no other documentation was required.

Guardianship issues did not appear to pose barriers for homeless children enrolling in schools in our sample which included mostly elementary and middle schools. Most school staff reported that they did not require proof of guardianship when adults came in to enroll children in school. About half of the respondents indicated that the fact that a child was not living with a legal guardian would probably only come to the school's attention when a problem such as poor attendance, suspicion of child abuse, or a custody issue came up. Only five school staff members reported that the school required proof of guardianship; however, like the issue of residency requirements, this requirement was not confirmed by a second staff member from the same school. Another small group of respondents (8) reported that while they did not require proof of guardianship, they tried to have the person with whom the child was living sign an affidavit accepting responsibility for the child, or they encouraged that person to obtain legal guardianship. Overall, the school staff included in our study were not concerned with guardianship issues at the time of enrollment.

Guardianship issues are probably more salient at the high school level where independent homeless youth may want to enroll without their parents. Respondents at the two high schools included in our study expressed concern about guardianship issues; however, none of them stated that proof of guardianship was required upon enrollment. Since we included only two high schools in this part of the study, our data are not representative of issues faced at this level of schooling.

These findings indicate that homeless children were not being denied access to education because of restrictive enrollment requirements or procedures. Most school staff recognized the need to get children enrolled in and attending school as soon as possible, and therefore, they were willing to relax regular enrollment procedures to do so. To school staff, identifying and addressing children's needs were the bigger issues in educating homeless children. Their responses and comments on these topics are discussed below.

One of the most significant problems facing school staff in educating homeless children was identifying which children were homeless. A number of school staff reported that there were special services, procedures, and programs available for children who were homeless, but they often did not know which children were homeless. When asked

whether it was better for schools to identify homeless children than not to identify them to avoid stigmatizing them, 81% of the school staff in our survey felt that it was better to identify homeless children, so that school staff could have a better understanding of their needs and offer them needed services and help.

School personnel were asked about specific issues and problems they may have faced in educating homeless children. The problem that affected the greatest proportion of homeless students, according to school staff estimates, was school attendance. These respondents estimated that about half of homeless children had attendance problems, and they believed that parents keeping children out of school was a problem for about a quarter of the homeless children.

Other issues that school staff perceived to rank high among homeless children were problems with health or hygiene, children being hungry, and children not having appropriate clothing. Overall, school respondents estmated that between a quarter and a half of homeless children had these problems when they came to school. Students with health or hygiene problems were typically referred to a school nurse or a local medical clinic. Because children coming to school hungry was a common occurrence at most of the schools in our sample, most school staff reported that the school had food such as milk and cereal for children who needed to eat in the morning, and school staff made sure that these children were enrolled in the free lunch program. For clothing needs, more than half of the respondents said that the school collected clothes to distribute to children who needed them, and about half of them said that families were referred to community agencies such as the Salvation Army to obtain clothing. Therefore, although school staff reported some short-term ways of addressing these problems, they were very concerned about the health, food, and clothing needs of homeless children, and many of them expressed frustration in not being able to do very much for children who came to school with these basic needs unmet.

The issue that ranked lowest in terms of school personnel's perceptions of problems affecting homeless children was teasing or ridiculing by other students. School staff felt that homeless children generally did not stand out and that teasing was not a problem. Parents and children in our study agreed that teasing was generally not a problem at school. One teacher with several homeless children in her class tried to prevent teasing incidents by helping her students understand issues related to homelessness through classroom discussions.

For many of the schools in our sample, the problems associated with children being homeless represented just one of the many challenges facing the school. When asked about how high a priority homeless children's needs were to school staff, relative to other schools issues, 42% of the respondents indicated that the needs of this population represented a very high priority for them, 28% said this was a moderately high priority area, and 30% felt that the needs of homeless children was a low priority for them. A number of respondents felt that the issues they faced in educating homeless children were not different than those they faced in educating other low-income children--many of their students, whether they had stable housing or not, had serious social, emotional, health, and other basic needs that presented great challenges to their academic success.

We asked school staff to give their view on the school's role in serving homeless children and found that some felt that the school should focus strictly on academic issues, while others felt that the school needed to address the many nonacademic needs of homeless children before they could expect these children to succeed in school. Understanding children's needs and providing them with the most appropriate education at school was a primary role of the school, according to about three-fifths of the respondents. About two-thirds of the respondents indicated that the school's role also went beyond helping children at school, including referring families to agencies for needed services (29% of respondents), providing health and social services at the school (29%), and helping the children's families in other ways (22%).

Regardless of their view of the school's role, 77% of the respondents reported that their school worked with other groups or agencies in providing services to homeless children. The vast majority of the contacts with other agencies involved referrals for services such as health care, counseling, assistance with food and clothing, housing assistance, child abuse and neglect advocacy, and other needed services. In a few schools, school staff worked with other agency staff to coordinate services for families, and in at least one school, outside agencies provided services on the school site for families who needed them. About three-fourths of the respondents did not feel that there were any barriers to working with other agencies; the remaining respondents cited problems such as insufficient resources and high case loads among agency personnel as barriers to working with agencies to serve homeless families.

Overall, school staff felt that they needed help in serving homeless children. When asked about the school's role in serving homeless children, a quarter of the respondents felt

that the school could do more to help them, but that they needed additional resources to do so. Whether they thought the school should address children's noneducational needs or focus only on their educational needs, many school staff expressed frustration in their lack of time and resources to help homeless children succeed in school. Among their suggestions for improving these children's chances for academic success were desires to improve the links with the community and service-providing agencies. Although children or their families were often referred to agencies for services, school staff often were not aware of the results of these referrals. School staff felt that more resources at the school and better linkages with service providers outside the school were needed to address homeless children's basic needs, so that in the classroom, children and teachers could focus on children's learning and academic performance.

Discussion

The high rate of school enrollment among homeless children in this study is encouraging for those who are concerned about homeless children's access to the education system. This study's estimates of the percentage of homeless children enrolled in school (88% for the interview sample, and 92% for the intake sample) diverge considerably from many previous reports of enrollment rates among homeless children. Several factors may account for this difference. First, data for this study were collected in 1991, four years following the passage of the McKinney Act, while many of the other studies of the education of homeless children were conducted before the law was enacted or shortly thereafter. Therefore, it is possible that the high enrollment rates found in our study are the result of changes in the way education institutions deal with homeless children due to the McKinney Act. Alternatively, the differences in enrollment estimates may be due to regional differences in enrollment procedures and other factors relating to children's access to school (such as the availability and accessibility of public transportation). Since we do not have comparative data on the same population (i.e., the San Francisco Bay Area) from an earlier time period (e.g., before the passage of the McKinney Act) or comparative data from a different geographic region, we cannot determine if either of these factors accounts for the difference in homeless children's school enrollment rates between our study and the other studies cited in the literature.

Differences in methodologies may also explain differences in enrollment estimates. For example, the 1988 U.S. Department of Education estimate that 30% of homeless children were not enrolled in school was based on estimates from each state that were

compiled in different ways. Some state estimates were based on administrators' perceptions of the number of homeless children not enrolled in school. Estimates based on empirical data probably more accurately describe the enrollment patterns of homeless children than those based on individuals' perceptions. Previous empirically-based investigations, as well as our study, indicate that the school enrollment rates among homeless children are relatively high.

We do not mean to imply that the results of our empirically-based study are without flaw. We expect that the enrollment rates reported by both the intake and the interview samples are slightly inflated due to systematic response bias (i.e., if parents inaccurately reported the status of their child's school enrollment, they were probably more likely to report that the child was enrolled than inaccurately report that the child was not enrolled). On the other hand, we believe that the study's methodology minimized this type of error. Furthermore, like many of the previous studies of homeless families, the interview sample for our study included only families living in shelters who may have been more integrated into education and social institutions, and thus who may have had higher rates of school enrollment than other homeless children. Our intake sample, however, included any homeless family who requested services from 40 service providers in the two counties included in this study. Although the intake sample may not represent the most isolated homeless families, we expect that it is representative of most homeless families with children. Despite the study's limitations, we believe the study provides evidence that enrollment in school is not a problem for most homeless students.

The responses of parents and school staff regarding the school enrollment process also suggest that homeless children, at least in the San Francisco Bay area, are not being denied access to education because of restrictive enrollment requirements. The reported degree of flexibility exercised by school staff at enrollment surprised us. Although respondents at some of the schools (25%) indicated that parents had to show proof of residency to enroll, most of the school staff respondents indicated that students were not denied school entry because they did not have proper residency documentation. Besides strict immunization requirements, other enrollment issues did not seem to get in the way of homeless children enrolling in school, according to the reports of school staff. One of the most interesting findings from the school survey was that school staff did not have uniform perceptions and agreement on enrollment policies pertaining to homeless families, as indicated by the many conflicting responses from individuals at the same school. Thus, regardless of any formal or informal policies that may exist, homeless families may have

different experiences at enrollment depending on which staff member they are in contact with.

This study revealed that there were more serious obstacles to children's education than school enrollment requirements. The high number of school transfers in homeless children's school careers creates a major impediment to educational success. With an average of one transfer per year since kindergarten, these children had little stability in terms of instruction, school programs, and friends at school. Transportation issues represent another serious obstacle to homeless children's schooling. The challenges of physically getting their children to school made it difficult for homeless children to attend school on a regular basis, according to their parents. Transportation problems also made it difficult to keep children in the same school when families moved. Some districts had special policies to allow homeless families to keep their children in the same school if they moved to a temporary residence outside the school's attendance area, but some families could not take advantage of this policy because of transportation difficulties.

Although this study provides only limited information about the school performance of homeless children, parents' responses and their stories indicate that they were very concerned about their children's educational performance. School staff as well were concerned about the learning potential and chances for academic success of homeless children who often came to school hungry and tired, had poor attendance, and had few resources and support at home to help them with their school work.

Parents did not feel that their children were performing well academically, yet they talked about the importance of school to their children's daily lives. For many of the children, school was the one place where they could feel normal and temporarily forget about their family worries. Despite the challenges they faced in getting to school and being successful in school, homeless children generally felt good about school. Thus, school played an important stabilizing role in these children's otherwise unstable lives.

To understand the full impact of homelessness on children's schooling, further investigations of children's school experiences are needed. Studies need to go beyond reporting test scores and grades to examining the factors affecting homeless students' performance in school. More qualitative investigations on the home and school lives of these students would also supplement the knowledge gained from studies such as this one.

Conclusions

This study suggests that problems with access to education among homeless children have more to do with transportation and attendance problems than with school enrollment procedures as suggested by previous studies. In any case, resolving problems of institutional access involves relatively straightforward legal solutions, such as the McKinney Act and its enforcement. Conversely, providing an education that meets the needs of students from different backgrounds and family situations has never involved straightforward solutions. The great challenge for educators is to find a way to help homeless children succeed in school, despite the disadvantages that their homelessness brings.

The first challenge involves minimizing the school disruptions resulting from frequent school transfers and poor school attendance. Policies which allow families to keep their children in the same school after they move would be a good starting point; however, families need to be informed of this type of policy. New York City regulations mandate that homeless families be given the option of keeping their children in the same school when they move to an emergency shelter; however, Rafferty (1989) found that nearly a third of the New York City homeless parents she interviewed were not informed of this option. For many families, special enrollment policies are not sufficient for avoiding a school transfer for their children. Rafferty found that for the New York City families who were given the option of keeping their child in the same school, 58% of the families elected to transfer the child to the school closest to their shelter, largely because of transportation difficulties. Policies pertaining to the education of homeless students must address the fact that many homeless parents do not have the resources or the time to transport their children to their original schools.

Second, schools must be able to deal with the pressing social, emotional, and health needs that homeless children come with to school. Schools should not be expected to solve all of these children's nonacademic problems; however, children's basic needs must be addressed before they can be expected to succeed academically. If the schools are to be asked to take on the burden of providing diverse services to homeless children, they need additional resources, and their programs for homeless children need to be evaluated on a regular basis.

Better linkages between schools, shelters, and other service providers would help schools as well as other agencies meet the needs of homeless children and their families. Coordinating services between the schools and service agencies was a top priority for individuals attending a San Francisco conference on educating homeless children, and it is an approach that is quickly gaining supporters among policymakers and educators in other communities that are trying to better meet the needs of at-risk populations.

Finally, all poor children face tremendous obstacles in their schooling. Whether a child is temporarily homeless or living in a permanent, but barely habitable dwelling, the effects of poverty can harm their chances for success in school and life. This study provides evidence that for homeless children, the obstacles to school success are even greater and more challenging than those faced by poor children who have a place to call home. Social policies which help homeless families find permanent housing may be the best way that we can improve homeless children's chances for success in school.

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